

My mother, Bloody Mary, Mary Contrary, steps up to a podium, another dark wooden jobber with another college emblem on it.

When she speaks, my mother's mouth won't open all the way, straps of cords and muscle that you see, that you watch while they hold back her mouth, around her jaw and down to the dark red line around her neck, right where a choker necklace would sit.

My mother, beauty martyr, the face of progress.

You hear people cough across the lecture hall, the air's that quiet, that still. People listen to my mother's words, hard to hear sometimes with the ways her bottom lip won't move under her teeth for the sound at the beginning of "phallogentric," or pop the P sound at the beginning of "power dynamic." The audience watches while my mother's red face, always blood red, blooms redder under the stage lights.

My mother's eyes, still the same blue, the blue from a peppermint gum package, the same blue as mine.

She tells it her way, about the night the sideshow started, the night she got free from her face.

The last game with my mother, it goes like this.

My mother sets her silver bowl on the table, the same silver bowl from when I microwave popcorn or made brownie mix. My mother won't let me use the oven, so I stir in the milk and the eggs to the brownie mix and eat it soft.

My mother's white rollerskates by the front door, like every Sunday night, every Sunday Night Adult Skate. Me sat next to them, ready to hand over her record with the

scary guy on the front and the four guys with big hair and makeup on the back. I turn a skate onto its side and skid my hand over one of the wheels, set it to spinning. My mother's skates, she takes the wheels apart and oils the bearings, and the wheels spin forever. Not like the skates they rent you at the roller rink where they smell like bowling alley and the wheels spin maybe two times all the way around before they dead stop. My mother's spin and spin if you flick them with a finger.

My mother clinks little jars and bottles around in the kitchen cabinet. Dried leaves, brown potion bottles mixed in with the medicines, the ones for when you have something real wrong, not just to look prettier.

My mother has big pores. Like really big on her nose. The same as me from my nose now, my grown-up nose. If you push on my nose, a black dot and then a trail of white stuff worms out, and then if you're like me there's scars and infections, and nothing heals right. My mother's isn't that bad, not then, but still, her big pores, not the sort of thing you want to bring to Sunday Night Adult Skate.

My mother carries a pile of jars and bottles to the table and the silver bowl. The flowers from one jar, my mother dumps them in the bowl. Then she pours something else in. Then a dropper of something dark brown. Dry leaves and potions, all the smell from the dead flowers from on back of the toilet. She stirs all of it with her hand, everything rustles in the bowl, and then the kettle whistles on the stove.

I always thought the smell of the stove and the smell from water boiling was what macaroni and cheese smelled like. My mother didn't let me boil noodles in a pot, but she let me use the kettle and then pour the hot water onto the noodles. They never cooked all the way soft like that, but I made up for it with extra butter. Sometimes when

my mom was out or asleep still on a Saturday way after the cartoons all ended and the shows all switched to shows with real people in them, I'd take two boxes of macaroni and cheese and take the cheese powder from one and throw the noodles away, then I'd make the one box of noodles with both cheese powders.

I spin the rollerskate wheel again, and the wheel spins while my mother clicks off the stove and pours the hot kettle water in her silver bowl of leaves and toilet flowers and juices, and the wheel still spins some more when she sets the kettle back on the stove, even a few spins left when my mother stops in the kitchen and does something with the phone, something I can't see, but I hear this snap and then she picks up the phone and hangs it up again.

That part of the Sunday Night Adult Skate ritual's different this time. And this other part.

She pulls on the back door and checks the broom handle in the door track. Then she crosses the living room and checks the front door right behind me, locks it, too.

Some moms would touch their son's hair or maybe his back, say something if they walked that close to him and he's being quiet and good on the floor. Not my mother. That's not how she was on Sunday Night Adult Skate nights, or any of the nights. She holds one hand tight around her gold heart choker necklace, the gold heart with a door on it and a picture inside.

I reach the record up to her, the one with the guys with the big hair and makeup on the back, but she says, "Maybe not tonight."

The skate wheel stops by the time my mother sits at the table and drapes a beach towel over her head. This red beach towel that says Kiss across it in big letters

and From The Sun in small letters not even as big as my hand, my hand from then, when I'm a kid.

What's supposed to happen is my mother puts on her record, she spins the gold heart from her necklace to the back of her neck, and she drapes her kiss towel over her head and over the bowl, then leans forward and holds her face over all the steam and the leaves from the silver bowl. Inside this tent, the steam and leaves make everything in her big pores soft, and then she drips it all out into the silver bowl. And by the time the record gets to the song about a black Cadillac, then her face is ready and she can leave me and go to Sunday Night Adult Skate.

A camera flash lights up the polished dark wood of the college podium, and my mother tells the same story, her part of my story. Where she says what she thought about with her head in her bowl every Sunday. With the steam and the dark. How it was a quiet time of solitude and reflection, and when she was under there, she didn't have to be a woman. She didn't have to be anything.

Which is what she really wanted back then.

My backpack at my feet, stuffed with merch and the wig I didn't need to get in. And the hat. I grew out my beard, bad and thin as it is, hair grown over the acne scars from all the pimples my mother wouldn't let me take pills for. But it turns out I didn't need all this disguise stuff. Nobody checked me out when I came in, no metal detector either, which is lucky.

With my mother's head in the bowl, this is where the game starts.

The game is I try and touch my mother. But she can't hear me. If she hears me, she'll tell me to leave her alone, and I lose. She won't let me touch her, and I lose.

It's my game. She doesn't know about it. I don't tell her that my game is to touch her. Don't tell her the stakes.

On all fours, I crawl from the front door and my mother's skates, across the tan carpeted living room. One arm, then the opposite knee, then the other arm. Past the part of the floor that creaks down when you step on it, make sure to set arms and legs on the sides of the creak down part.

My mother says into the bowl, "I hear you."

I stop, red light. Maybe she guessed.

She says, "I hear you breathing. That's one. Go upstairs and get ready for bed." Her voice echoes hard off the silver bowl.

One loss for me. Back to start, to the roller skate.

My mother can skate backwards. She skates at the speed skate songs. She wins the game they call Shoot the Duck, the one where you crouch down on one skate and put the other leg way out straight in front of you. She comes home with friends sometimes, man friends, or goes to their houses after she Shoots the Duck so good.

I set one skate so all four wheels are up in the air, and I spin all four wheels, the sound of them a smooth, small thunder.

"Hey," my mother says. "That's two."

But the Hey she's talking to, he's not even there by the skate. He's green light, halfway across the room, over the creak down spot, past the shelf with a tea cup that rattles on its plate if you step too hard. I stay near the wall this time and get close

enough to smell the leaves and the steam from my mother's silver bowl, their smell different up close. Like the toilet flowers, but something else, too. The burned popcorn from when I forget and leave the bag in the microwave too long. My mother makes me eat it anyway, when she catches me. Last time she wasn't awake when the popcorn burned, and I buried the burned popcorn and the bag in the backyard and made another bag.

Closer to my mother, her hand, the one she stirred the leaves and potions with, the skin red. Dark red and fat up to the wrist, the way my hand swoll up the time I ran over a wasp nest in the ground with the lawnmower and they got me all over my knuckles and fingers.

I lean towards my mother, reach to the back of her neck, to the gold heart. And the floor under me does this snap noise.

"Hey. Oh." she says. "That's. That is. Of two."

Her voice different. Like her teeth wobble in her mouth.

My mother grabs a water bottle off the wooden podium with two hands, one hand covered in young, fresh skin, the other a red, old woman's hand, the veins dark and thick around her knuckles. She picks up the bottle, and in front of all these people, tilts her head back, pours the water in, and swallows with an open mouth cough. All this blown up big on two screens on both sides of the room.

Her lips won't close around a bottle opening. Forget a straw. The scarring moves so tight in around her lips that she doesn't even really have lips anymore. Just scars and deep red strokes all the way into her mouth, to her bright teeth.

Bloody Mary and her white, straight teeth. It wasn't until way after braces straightened out her teeth that my mother learned about what she calls toxic beautification, the part of the story that she tells now, at the podium, American beauty standards and unrealistic and problematized, which meant no braces for me back then, and now it means we're near the end of the story and it's time for me to pick up my bag and stand in the aisle, near the back, to be first to one of the microphones set up on the auditorium's sides.

My hand over my face. It's habit by now, habit from way before all this, from my teeth, from the smashed wad of skin that used to be my nose, from the sideshow days.

This time, after I get caught, I stomp back to the skates. The wheels almost dead.

I slap the skates and spin the wheels hard. Then I start with one, spin it fast, then the next, then the next so all four spin. Then I stomp down the hall, slam my door to my room. From outside.

This time I creep soft past the creak spot, the tea cup, the wall, and I'm right next to my mother. Close enough to touch her. I reach out to touch the top of her leg. Then stop. Move my face close to the bowl, the metal and the juice in the bowl the only thing between us. The heat from the bowl, I feel it on my cheek.

The smell. It's more now. More burned popcorn. And the slime from the blue plastic jar my mother tells me to put on my chest when I'm sick.

Other kids, their moms put it on for them.

I reach to poke my mother's leg, a soft touch with the tip of one finger up against her bright, light blue jeans. And nothing.

No, *Hey*. No, *That's Three*, even though this is definitely three, maybe even four.

I reach for the black ribbon, the one that holds the gold heart around her neck, the ribbon wet and dark from the steam. Before my fingers reach, the skate wheels stop, and it's quiet except for a slurp sound from under the towel. Then a cough into the water.

I breathe in fast and loud. I say, "Mother?"

Still no *three*.

She coughs and chokes, and I grab tight around the heart, and my mother falls out of the chair, tips the bowl and the hot leaf water all over the tan carpet.

Steam goes up from the carpet. My mother's face, it's the dye from the red kiss towel. Until it's the smell, the chemical smell, and the blood, and the white bubbles on her face skin. Her eyelids closed and red and thick over her blue eyes, the ones from a peppermint gum package.

My mother tells her made-up part of the story here. She says the chemicals she mixed up, that they ate into the tan carpet. That the tendrils of carpet went crusty, then stood up straight and hard. That she kept the carpet that way, as a reminder of who she used to be, this rollerskating woman who could win Shoot the Duck, but mostly because the roller rink DJ's let her cheat. Because of power dynamics. Because she was pretty.

Was pretty.

She tells about that crusty carpet and how it was ugly, but it was strong. It survived. You could vacuum it and nothing. You could set a table leg so it rested on that

part, and instead of the table leg pushing a dent in the carpet, the table wobbled, higher on that one leg.

And she tells my part of the story. How she was strong and it didn't matter what the kids from our neighborhood called her. That they called her Bloody Mary. Kids said if you whisper her name 3 times, she'd be there in your mirror or in your bedroom window. She would come and take your face away, too. Like what happened to her son, the sideshow.

Kids said all those things. To me. Not to her. But that doesn't fit the story. I don't fit the story.

Almost the end now. When she tells everyone the lesson. The part that goes "And that day I learned" and then she talks about how ugly makes you strong. The chorus she used on me when I wanted to shave a break between my eyebrows. When my mother rested her silver bowl on my head and cut my hair. When the dentist told my mother that gold was the most practical material for a crown, just didn't match for a tooth so close to the front. When the blackheads sprouted in my nose and I pushed them out, and when the infection on my nose ate away my nose skin until my nose wasn't a nose anymore, instead a wide, flat smashed piece of bubble gum in the middle of my face, and when I see the doctor now they always ask how much I drink or about the kinds of drugs I use.

When it was too many things and the kids at school called me Sideshow. When I wanted a friend so bad I let a kid charge other kids to touch my nose, and we split the money, and when Susie Curossiant, the cutest girl in the whole class, paid her dollar and poked my nose, she ran away and screamed and did this dance where she lifted

her feet way off the ground and stomped all the way around the basketball court. And the whole time she danced around, I smelled the soap from her hands.

All that happened, but my mother, when she talks at the colleges, she tells about what the kids called her and the patch of carpet and what she learned that day.

She doesn't even mention I was there.

While my mother coughed and her face boiled, I ran and grabbed up the phone. It didn't work, I put it to my ear and no noise came out. The cord part from the phone into the wall, gone.

I unlock the front door and run across the way to the old couple that lives there, the ones who call each other "mom" and "dad" and that gave me Pop Rocks and told me not to tell my mother about it. I was scared the cord part of their phone would be gone, too, but it was still there, and they get people to come and save all the parts of my mother except her face.

I wait in the yard while the old man, Dad, goes in the house. The old woman, Mom, she stands behind me, hugs me to her while we both face the front door. Her legs warm against my back.

The gold heart choker still in my small fist. I try to open it, and then I hold it up to the old woman and ask her if she can get it open.

She pushes a thumbnail in the crack and snaps it open. She doesn't open it far enough to look inside, and she hands it back to me.

Inside, a man. He looks familiar.

The first auditorium question goes to the person at the microphone on the other side of the room. A woman asks a question my mother gets asked all the time, about which piece of street art of her is her favorite.

My mother answers this question every time like it's a good question, and my mouth follows along while she says that there are many good pieces, like the one called Mary Contrary and the one called Face of Progress, and elevating the voices of artists of color is always vital, and then she lands, like always, on the Bloody Mary as her favorite, the giant one painted on the side of a vintage store, the kind of thing you see of Mary, Jesus' mom, in her robes, her head covered. But this one has my mom's face, her red, corded, scab of a face with the blue eyes from peppermint gum packages. And the hands, where they're in prayer position on Jesus' Mary, my mother's are the same way, but one is painted a deep, dripping red.

Then my mother requests they let women ask questions first, so someone moves in front of me, bumps around me with my backpack held tight to my chest, and asks a question about my mother's books. Then another question about the Supreme Court, a question everyone in the room wants my mother's opinion on because she tried to kill herself with a silver bowl full of chemicals. Then it's my turn.

"Hi. Hi everybody." My voice echoes back to me in the auditorium.

I reach into my backpack, up high on my chest.

"My mother, Bloody Mary, there's a lot she didn't tell you. I have the truth. In my books. They're, they'll be for sale outside. After."

Then I pull out a handful of stuff from my backpack.

"I'll have these for sale, too. Bloody Mary stickers. Um. Koozies."

And then I pull my mother's silver bowl from my backpack.

"I have this, too...the silver bowl. The one my mother put her face in."

I hold it up and turn so everyone can see the silver bowl that melted my mother's face.

"I'll have it outside the building. You can even put your face in it, \$20 bucks. And, um, mother?"

My mother watches the microphone on the other side of the room, but I see her hands tight on the wooden podium's sides.

I say, "I have another thing. Your thing. If you want it back."

I don't know how to end, so I just say the last thing to my mother, that I've got her thing. She reaches up to her neck, the dark red line burned into her neck from where the ribbon soaked up the steam, the line that separates her head from her body.

Every face on my mother's, to watch for what she'll do next.

She nods to the microphone on the other side of the room, and someone starts in on a question about sexism and a commercial for exercise bikes.

My table set up outside, close as I can get to the lecture hall front doors with the permit I got, I empty my backpack and arrange everything. My books: printer paper and plastic comb bindings. Three worn copies, the same ones that traveled with me to New York, Wellesley, Northampton. Then the newer stuff, Bloody Mary stickers, just like the piece of street art with Jesus' mom. Embroidered patches and enamel pins. My favorite, Bloody Mary slidey pens with my mother's face, her deadface, and when you turn them

upside-down, her face drops away and you see the bloody mess, the same face I saw, the face my mother kept.

And the bowl. Set underneath a towel. Nobody sees the bowl until they pay.

Zero takers. I watch the signing line through the glass doors at the front of the building, and I go for eye contact with everyone as they leave. Mostly young women, mostly with their makeup scrubbed off, mostly they pretend to not see me except for a couple who say I suck.

It comes down to my mother, alone. In her coat that's on-purpose too big, leaving the lecture hall with a designer bag over her shoulder.

She steps up to my table and looks over the spread.

I say, "Did you sell out your copies?"

"No," she says. "The campus bookstore handles all of that. Your mother doesn't have to haul her own books around anymore."

She picks up one of the slidey pens with her young, flesh hand.

"Eight bucks," I say.

She holds the pen upside-down and then sighs, sort of, the best she can through her mouth's permanent O shape.

She spreads her hands wide, slow, over the whole table like she's presenting it to me. She says, "The books, okay. This, however," she picks up a sticker. "This is a bit...circus."

I say, "That part where you drink the water? That's not even a little circus?"

She reaches up and closes her hand, her young hand, around the place where the heart choker used to sit. The one I pulled off her when she fell out of the chair. The one I took to the library every weekend, to hold open next to the pages of the old yearbooks they kept there, hold it up next to every man from every high school in our town. To find the picture of this man, find his name.

My own yearbooks from when I was in school, you could flip through and see the sideshow, worse and worse every year.

My mother's yearbook photos with a black, oval sticker over her face after she told the nice lady who worked at the library that the yearbooks showed her deadface.

And none of the yearbooks had him. This man where half of his face smiles.

I hold the locket out to my mother. Still gold, but tarnished all over. The ribbon frayed all the way around.

My mother opens her bag, and I smell the box of the dryer sheets she rubs on her face before she speaks, to irritate everything and make the red true red.

She reaches the tip of a credit card towards me, but I shake my head.

I say, "Tell me who he is."

My mother reaches for the line on her neck. She says, "Here's how this works. I tell you who he is. I get the locket. I pay you for all of this garbage," she swipes her hands in the air over all the pictures of her, her dead face and her now face. "And that's it. You don't make more. You don't come back."

My mother holds her credit card. My fingers shake when I pinch the card away and start in on the math.

When my mother takes her card back, opens her bag and drops the credit card back inside, I hold out the locket. My fingers shake, and I drop it on the table. My mother waits, her old woman, red hand still flat out in front of her. She waits for me to scrape the locket off the table and drop it in her hand.

She sticks her thumbnail in the crack and snaps open the heart. Then she pinches the picture out.

My mother says, "His name is Carlos Cavazo."

With the picture, Carlos and my mother's deadface, faced towards my mother, I can see the back of the picture, half of it more yellow with small, typed letters on it. On the back you can see the permanent marker around the outside of the two heads where it bled through the paper.

My mother pulls the two sides of the heart, and the picture peels apart into two neat pieces. She crumples the half with her face in her fist, and she hands the other half back to me.

Carlos Cavazo. His half of the picture from a magazine cutout. My mother's a real picture. Stuck together, marked around the edge to erase the different backgrounds, make it look like Carlos and my mother were maybe in the same place at the same time.

My mother says, "I had the biggest crush. Maybe a thing for guitar players. I never managed to see Quiet Riot live. Single moms don't do those sorts of things."

She says, "You can bag my items now."

I do what my mother says, pull a plastic grocery sack from the crumpled wad of them I keep under the table, and I pick up handfuls of pens, bend the stickers in my fist and cram everything in the bag.

Carlos was never going to show up in those yearbooks. Carlos never knew my mother. She only knew him. From his makeup and big hair on that back of that album from the Sunday Night Adult Skate ritual.

My mother picks up the bowl with both hands, old and young, along the bowl's metal lip, and she says, "It's really the same one?"

She holds the bowl up in front of her, then moves the bowl to her, until she's got the front of her head all the way inside. Her face hidden behind the silver.

She says. "Might be a good showpiece, really, done right." She says, "But the sooner you stop turning my speaking engagements into a sideshow, the better."

I don't answer. I'm back in the game. My mother won't let me touch her, but with her face in the bowl, it's my chance.

I drop the bag of junk and reach for my mother, to her neck, the place her gold heart used to be. Then further. Up to her throat.

The cords and muscles under her chin, on the sides of her neck, they look tough, but they're soft on my fingertips. Warm.